

A drab, unassuming little place, tucked away where an unsuspecting passerby might not even see it. This far out, there should be no one to pass by in the first place. That was the idea, anyway...

The open car didn't give very much protection from the chill breeze but he was reluctant to leave what little shelter it provided and didn't disembark until the real estate broker went so far as to open the door for him and give a strained smile. Wilson had forgotten the man's name on the way here.

He stepped out onto the grass, stuck his hands into his pockets and looked over what might be his future yard, mentally mapping out where a fence could go.

"So," said the broker. "What do you think?"

He was a tall man in a dark coat, with round glasses and a small mustache. A bowler hat perched on top of all that. He could have been any bank man, businessman, member of college faculty, mortician, director at an institution...

Looking at him made Wilson feel tired and brought a sour taste into the back of his throat. He turned his attention back to the house. "It's awfully small."

"It's cozy."

"It's small." He ambled up to the door with the other man keeping pace beside him. Wilson tapped the doorframe with his knuckles. "Feels like it's got dry rot. And termites." He had never witnessed either of those in person, and the wooden frame felt solid enough to him.

"I can show you another, if you prefer."

"I may as well look inside first."

The rooms were narrow and dark, and the broker's hat nearly brushed against the low ceilings. Wilson's hat did not. The house seemed to fit around him perfectly, sheltering.

"The house that looked small from the outside," said Wilson, "is not any bigger on the inside. That's what us scientists call conservation of mass, my friend." He pointed at a crack in the wall with his shoe. "Looks like it's falling apart at the seams a little."

The other man's jaw was tight, but his voice remained calm and pleasant. "I can show you another spot."

"I may's well see all of it," Wilson mumbled. He rubbed the tip of his nose along his sleeve (the cold had made it become damp) and shuffled along to look into the WC. "It has running water?"

"Yes, it's very modern."

Wilson flushed the toilet and monitored the swirling water inside to be certain that it did what it was supposed to do and nothing was living in it. "Depends on what you call modern, I suppose." He checked inside the toilet tank to be quite certain nothing was living there either. He didn't know how long the house had been vacant. "Does this place have electricity?"

"No, it has gas lighting."

"So I'm going to have to wire it up myself?!"

"If you want it to have electricity, yes."

Wilson sighed and shook his head. "I have to have electricity." There were two more rooms on this floor, one a dingy kitchen. He turned on the sink to verify that it worked.

"It's quite rare for a house this rural to have indoor plumbing," said the broker. "I'm not certain of your chances of finding another that has it and electricity too."

"Hrmph. I have to have electricity. I'll have to build a generator and wire the whole place...only four rooms, eh?"

"There's also an attic."

"Oh? Let's see it."

The broker opened up a ceiling panel in the next room and a ladder came sliding down. Wilson went over to take a look. "The ladder has a broken rung, I could break my neck on that," he said, and shimmied up it before the broker could reply.

Fading afternoon light slanted through big, round windows into a wide-open room. There was enough space in here for a lab table, his bookshelves, his specimens, and more- and there was a woodburning stove up here, too, so it must be quite cozy in winter.

He clasped his hands under his chin.

"Well?" the broker called.

Wilson cleared his throat. He absolutely couldn't sound like he loved the place. "Walls aren't finished up here... looks like I could get splinters from this floor..."

"It is an attic. Most use it to store things."

"I just don't think this house is worth two grand."

He'd never been an expert bargainer, but having set the stage with as many complaints as possible, he was bound to get a few bucks off the price. Right?

The realtor's tone of voice was neutral. "I see."

"What about maybe half of that?" Wilson suggested. "One thousand?" You were supposed to start low, right?

"I don't believe my client would care to hear that offer, Mr. Higgsbury."

"Er. Fifteen hundred? I've got to pay to install electricity, you know." And he'd have to pay movers, and he didn't have all of his equipment yet, oh and- food. He couldn't live without food. His money ought to last him for some time, but nothing was coming in to replace it and might not be for a while yet. Spending two thousand would hurt. And it was a really small house...

"Electricity was never guaranteed, Mr. Higgsbury."

"Ah... nineteen?... I mean, there's probably dry rot and the bathroom smelled moldy."

There was a brief pause from down below and then: "It's the funniest thing. I could take away this ladder and you'd be stuck up there until you froze to death."

"There's a stove and wood-"

"Starved to death."

"I don't think that's the funniest thing," said Wilson. "It's not remotely funny at all." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked out the window at all of the vast nothing that would separate the outside world from a laboratory housed in this attic. There wasn't likely to be anything else in even the outside edge of his price range that had running water and such a lovely location. "Fine. I want the house."

"Excellent!"

He sighed deeply. "Yes..."

///

PRIVATE PROPERTY.

Yes, this sign was clear enough, he thought, especially paired with the fence. A nice bit of work. No one ought to be coming in here.

He dusted off his hands and turned to go in- the leftover tools and materials needing to be put away could wait a bit, but his coffee break could not- and there was a face there.

He stepped back with a stifled yelp.

A tiny little girl with gigantic, ethereal eyes of pale green. She was wearing a plain white dress and no shoes, and her loose brown hair fell to her waist.

Wilson glanced over each shoulder, thinking of ghosts and the Grim Reaper. Darnit, no! He was a scientist. A rational man. This was just a normal kid. How she'd gotten her scrawny little self all the way out here he didn't know, but she was a normal kid.

"Well, where did you come from?" he asked. His voice sounded strange to his own ears, sort of hoarse and dusty. He realized he hadn't spoken aloud in over a week.

She put her fingers in her mouth and studied him. This was awfully inconvenient.

"Where are your parents?" he asked.

She turned and pointed down the road.

"You're going to have to go home. You shouldn't be here. This is private property."

He pointed at the sign and wondered if she was even old enough to read it. He was not good at judging the ages of children. Perhaps he ought to be grateful that she seemed to understand speech.

She looked up at him with interest and did not move.

"So," he said, "you oughtta go back to your parents." He pointed in the direction she had indicated. She again did not move, and he walked a little ways and beckoned her to follow. "This way." One hoped that she had indicated the correct direction.

He beckoned again and she padded after him. Hopefully her parents weren't too far away. Passing motorists who'd broken down, perhaps? Ugh, if they were, he'd have to help them on their way. There weren't any mechanics anywhere around here.

He could see quite a long way down the road, which sloped gently downhill, and there was no sign of anyone. It was likely to be a long walk. He paused a moment, glancing over his shoulder to make sure there was no broken-down car two feet behind him that he was blithely heading away from. There wasn't.

The little girl stopped walking when he did, and continued to peer at him with fascination. And then she put her tiny little sticky hand in his.

"Do your parents know you walk up to strange men in the woods and follow them around like a duckling?" he asked.

She put her other hand into her mouth.

"Maybe they're the kind that don't really care," Wilson muttered.

She was putting him in mind of his small cousins and half-cousins and removed cousins and nieces and nephews. The last time he'd been to a family gathering they had all taken turns coming over to where he was sitting alone in the corner and climbing into his lap, for some reason, and then just sitting there babbling and pulling at his clothes until a parent remembered their existence and came over to drag them away before they could contract a case of crazy.

He would never see any of those little guys again. At least, if he ever did, they'd be all grown up and wouldn't want him around anymore.

The kid looked into his face and squeezed his hand. He could almost see the parade of germs marching up his arm from her tiny fingers... but pulling away would be

unconscionably cruel. He'd just return her to her parents as fast as possible and take a bath when he got home.

Some ways later, he noticed a small dirt path turning off of the road. "Don't tell me I've got neighbors!" he cried. That dratted broker hadn't mentioned this. The one thing he'd insisted on was no neighbors. That was the whole point. And these people were certainly close enough to be considered neighbors. And even if he wanted to move again, which he really didn't, he couldn't afford it, so now he was stuck with the neighbors.

The little girl looked startled.

"I didn't mean to yell," he said. "I'm not mad at you or anything! Er, your parents live down there, don't they?"

She nodded and pointed at the dirt path.

"Ugh. Well, let's see you safely returned to the bosom of your family."

The path was rather long. They weren't too close to him, at least. He and the child had been walking for at least ten minutes by now. She must be awfully sturdy- she didn't even look tired, after making her way to his place and then making the return trip.

Up ahead was a faded-blue farmhouse. "That's your place, right?" he asked, pointing at it.

She nodded.

"How'd you end up all the way over at my place from here?"

She said nothing.

He walked up to the front door and rapped sharply at it.

There was no answer. He knocked again, louder. Darn it, he didn't have all day! He kept knocking until the door suddenly opened and he nearly fell inside.

A large, solid man in overalls looked at him. "Who might you be?" His eyes set upon the girl and his eyes narrowed. "What're you doing with my daughter?"

"She was in my yard," Wilson said. "I brought her home..."

That man was-

orderly-sized-

-er, he was big. He sized up Wilson, probably thinking about how he could throw Wilson over his shoulder like a sack of flour, and then said: "Come here, Amelia."

She scurried forward and clung to her father's leg. "Funny hair," she said, putting her hands to her own head and then pulling them up and away. Hmm, so she could talk after all.

The farmer patted her head and peered at Wilson. "What do you mean, she was in your yard?"

"I live down that way." He pointed in what might or might not have been the right direction. "The house with the..."

"The shack on the hill?"

"Yes. And she just sort of toddled over."

The other man's voice was deep and measured. "No one lives there."

"I do," said Wilson. He drew a deep breath. He had every right to be here, and he was the one who'd been inconvenienced, and he would not be intimidated! "You know, it's private property and she shouldn't be there. And it's quite a way, so I'm a bit surprised you weren't looking for her already."

"Maybe you'd better go back to where you came from," said the farmer. "And maybe you'd better not be back."



Wilson nodded. "And maybe you'd better keep your daughter in your own yard," he said. "Darwin forbid I should ever breed, but if I did, I'd try to keep an eye on what I spawned!"

The door slammed shut. Wilson heard what sounded like a shotgun clicking, and decided he didn't want to stick around.

He'd moved in late at night, made one trip, and until today hadn't made any visible changes to the property, so it wasn't surprising that the neighbors hadn't known he was there. Yes, very reasonable. He'd just never come back here, and if the kid wound up in his yard again, he would pretend not to notice. Everything was going to be fine.

If only his house were even farther away from society... perhaps on a deserted island.

///

There was no human habitation on this island.

Wilson lay on his belly in the grass, chin propped in hands. The sun soaked into his back and curled up in his dark hair. Today was pleasant, so far.

He smoothed out the rough map, which had a habit of rolling up and folding in odd places, probably because it was made from reeds and hope. A crucial landmark smudged into nothing under his hand. Oh dear.

He'd been all over the place and there was nobody. Nobody except the odd humanoid pigs; dissection and study had not shown him whether they were the product of evolution or a horrible liason that was not meant to be, but whether they had human ancestry or not, he did not consider them to be of his kind.

(If they were the product of evolution, were they pigs that had taken on the characteristics of humans, or humans that had become piglike? "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which." The sentence popped into his head as if he remembered it from somewhere, but he couldn't place the origin.)

Maxwell was here, as well, but the longer Wilson lived on this island the less he considered Maxwell to be human. He was more akin to the things that lived in the dark- the things that seethed together and formed an inchoate mass that watched. Perhaps they weren't real, but it felt safest to act as though they were.

That left nobody. Not even a helpful man Friday. On the one hand, humans would most likely have been able to help him get home. On the other hand...well, he was guaranteed to never have to see anyone.

"I can do whatever I want, I guess," he said, folding the map, failing to get it into the correct configuration, and re-folding it. "Like find food, hunt, look for a way home, and desperately build shelter! Complete freedom!"

He sighed and stretched in the sunlight. It wasn't so bad; it wasn't the worst thing. His condition was very good, all things considered. He'd lost a little weight, but that was an improvement, really. He would find a way out eventually, and what if he didn't? He could probably set up a nice little lab here and live in peace with no brats from town hiking over to egg his house in Halloween, and there were enough rabbits, berries and beefalo here to feed a dozen scientists.

But he would find a way out. That demon in the suit wouldn't have the best of him!

There was no hurry, though, as long as the weather stayed good, and the berries stayed plentiful...

Hm? What was that distant noise?

Barking?

///

The impact of the spear against the hound's head thudded up through his arms and shoulders. A horrible crunch rang out. Ice exploded in his bones, but the thing was dead now and he'd shake off the frost in a moment.

A vicious sting in his shoulder. Bracing a foot against the hound's bloody skull, he wrenched out the spear and looked up to meet the eyes of the walrus. Anger turned to fear on the ridiculous whiskered face.

"You'd better run," Wilson rasped.

The first time he'd seen one of these creatures it had looked friendly and he'd walked up to say hello. A dart had zinged right into his throat, and he'd spent a lovely time slowly bleeding out and choking to death on his ruptured trachea. No amount of cuddly whiskers and cute little monocles were going to save it from death now.

The walrus ran.

Wilson was bruised and bleeding, wheezing in the frozen air, aching and sore, but he was angry. And the walrus barely had legs.

The spear coming down made a blubbery sound. He blacked out a little and when he came to the walrus was dead and had been stabbed a lot more than was really necessary, or sane. He shuddered and put his hands to the sides of his head.

He glanced up and the walrus' cub was huddling some distance away, and had seen, presumably, every minute of its father being beaten to a bloody pulp. Wilson averted his eyes. When he looked back, the walrus child had fled back to its cozy igloo.

He shouldn't feel too sorry for it, it would grow up into another hunter.

He made a fire to warm his trembling hands and regroup for a bit. He picked out the darts that studded his armor, his shoulder, his thigh, and wrapped his wounds with bits of the walrus' sash, and sat for a moment, rubbing tired eyes.

The creature's hat had fallen into the snow. Wilson picked it up and brushed off the walrus hairs. It was a perfectly nice golf hat and could've sold for four bucks at Sears. Where the walrus had gotten it, he'd never know. This place was full of twisted parodies of humanity, and distant echoes of civilization. Of course there was bipedal walrus wearing a golf hat and of course he had to kill it violently or be shot to death. Why the heck not?!

Wilson would keep the hat. He'd earned it. And it fit him perfectly, somehow. Finally, he ate as much of the walrus' gamy, fatty flesh as he could get down, since he didn't know when he'd again be able to find anything to eat besides carrots, and then it was time to move on. He grabbed the homing rod and waved it about. It started shrieking immediately. He grit his teeth.

The site of the assembly was just over the next hill, and it was guarded. He reached for the spear again. He just had to beat those machines and then he could move in another world further.

So close. So close now...

///

"You insolent-"

Throb.

"-pitiful-"

Throb.

"-insignificant ant!"

Wilson was not in terribly good shape.

"Do not arouse the wrath of the Great Maxwell!"

"Hrrgh..."

"You will regret coming any further..."

It was his old friend 'petty rage' that got his battered body up and grabbing the homing device. The 'Great Maxwell'. Great. "What's great will be my fist in your eye."

Maxwell was gone from view, but he'd heard it. He heard everything.

Those clockwork monsters had really done a number on Wilson and he had a long way yet to go, in the dark, no less. He had never made it through this world of night before. First time for everything, though.

A circle of logs and ropes supported his much-abused ribs. He wasn't completely vulnerable, he had armor. He'd made it himself and it was quite solid!

He took a deep breath and headed forward. Through mud, monsters and mayhem he would go...

Home was waiting for him. His laboratory. Doctors to look after whatever physical damage he took with him, food from a store, and peace and quiet in his own house.

Provided it was still standing.

Not only home awaited him, though... there was also vengeance and the satisfaction of being master of his own fate. Maxwell could trick him once but he couldn't keep him here forever!

He needed to pay attention to his surroundings. He'd just almost slipped in the mud and fallen over.

The rest of the world passed by in an exhausted haze, and at the end, just when he was sure he was going to die fighting the last guards, as he had found nothing to dress his wounds throughout this horrible midnight landscape- they were all dead, some helpful spiders having nested too close. He managed to avoid them while setting up the machine, and then-

It was so quiet.

Maxwell wasn't here to greet him. Had he reached the end?

Wilson sat in a kneeling position, breathing slowly. He was shaking. It couldn't possibly be over, he thought, even though he knew he'd nearly killed himself working to get here- it couldn't just be over. For something that had seemed so difficult at the time, it felt as if it had all been too easy now.

Ah. Here was the rod. He picked it up. He must have more to locate. What if- what if Maxwell had sent him to another of these worlds- and was going to keep cycling him through more of them- what if there was no end?

He headed forward. There was nothing here but tile, lights wooshing into existence as he passed them, a few twisted and thorny trees, and a whole lotta dark.

So very quiet. The rod wasn't making any sound. Not even the slow, grinding noises it made when he was quite far away from any of the items. Then... this must really be the end, then, mustn't it? Unless the game had changed.

He came to a large field of marble trees, paused, and continued straight ahead. Something felt wrong here. He didn't care to stop for too long.

What was that noise? Was that music? Perhaps he'd passed into delirium...

Up ahead was one of those giant statues of Maxwell. He spat at it in passing, and when he looked away, he saw...

Maxwell?

Ah... something was very wrong.

///

Something was very, very wrong.

///

He'd come out on top eventually! The key was persistence! If there was such a thing as 'no way out', he'd still be in a little white room somewhere. He had acknowledged that he had lost, and must now accept it and move on.

Wilson skewered a carrot and began to roast it. Had to keep his strength up, even though he could cheerfully never see another single blasted carrot ever again. Now, what to do next? He'd already reconstructed a rough base of operations. He would have to search the island for his next course of action.

After all that had happened... he sort of just wanted to rest. But he'd been resting all day, not moving far from the fire pit. It was time to move on.

Supposing he found another door that led to another nightmare realm that led to exactly the same chair and ragtime music? Eyuuugh. But this line of thinking could only lead to defeat, so he rejected it.

Something was moving around some distance behind him. Wilson was decidedly not in the mood. Maybe if he ignored it, it'd go away.

He'd set out on a search in the morning. There should be plenty of stuff to forage, so he didn't need to waste any time packing food. He should definitely take mapping materials...

That thing was still there and it was closer than he'd realized. Alright. Fine. It wanted to die? He could make it die. He threw down the carrot and picked up the nearest tool. An axe. Good for splitting logs AND heads!

He could see bushes rustling nearby, and beady eyes glinting out of-

"AAH! YOU!"

Maxwell flinched and drew back, head held high.

He was gonna get it he was gonna get it he was gonna get "I have every right to be here!" it he was gonna get it he was "I was the king, you know-" gonna get it he was gonna get it he was gonna "Back! Away with you! Don't you d-"

Whump!

Just one punch just one punch just one MAXWELL'S HANDS WERE IN THE WAY.

"Just let me hurt you!"

"No!"

Pressure at Wilson's throat. This? Snake? Was? Trying to choke HIM? An opening. He drew back his fist-



The light. The light was going! The fire was almost out. The fire couldn't go out. The only thing stronger than anger was his desire not to be in the dark.

He broke away and scrambled for the nearest burnable. The log he'd left on the ground to sit on! Here it was. In it went. The darkness and its teeth receded.

He was utterly winded, and so was- ah. His uninvited guest. Who was supposed to be dead, come to think of it.

The sudden darkness had been like a splash of cold water in the face and, cured of his seething rage, he seemed to really see Maxwell for the first time. A decrepit old man. It was plain as the outsized lips on Maxwell's craggy old face. His entire... sense was all wrong.

This was not the demon that had taken him here. That had not ever really existed, had it? It had been a construct the whole time, a puppet, loosely based on this sad, tired old man.

Wilson sat down on the ground. Maxwell stood for a moment, at a loss, and then sat across from him.

Clever, clever, he thought. Another glimpse of the carrot, so to speak, only to have it again turn to nothing- oh, you want to get revenge on the demon who ruined your life and what would have eventually been a promising scientific career? He's too pitiful to hurt, and now he's dead. You dared try to help him? Enjoy suffering in his stead! Aha! Now he's back, and free, and alive, and so are you- however, he's clearly not that same man, and you may as well have been trying to punch your grandfather; shame on you, Higgsbury.

And the actual carrot he'd been eating was now lying in the fire, where he'd dropped it.

Maxwell cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak.

"Don't talk to me..." said Wilson.

"Ah," said Maxwell.

"Don't even look at me," said Wilson.

They both looked at the fire instead.

///

Maxwell was pitiful. Wilson did not know what he did during the day, nor did he ask, but he turned up every night to huddle by the fire and scowl, and look pathetic, and glance at the cooking pot. As requested, he did not speak to Wilson.

He must know so many things! But surely he wouldn't ever share them.

He seemed to be following Wilson sometimes, during the day, but the flickers of something evil at the corner of his eye always turned out to be nothing when viewed head on. Was it Maxwell or the forces of the world?

Maxwell should know the answer to that. Wilson hadn't tried to ask him.

Maxwell didn't seem to be eating anything but foraged berries and he'd made no armor. He didn't seem to have any survival skills at all. If he died out here while Wilson did nothing, would that be murder? That would be murder, right? Wilson had already sort of murdered him once, and it was an experience he didn't want to repeat.

On the third day Wilson finally gave up and made him something to eat.

Maxwell looked at the simple stick-with-meat-and-veggies in disbelief. "This isn't poisoned, is it?"

"I don't poison people," Wilson said, louder than he'd intended. It was the first thing he'd said to the man since that first night.

Maxwell hesitated a fraction of a second and then attacked the food like a hungry wolf. Wilson observed him.

He was going about this all the wrong way, allowing his (very natural) bitterness and anger to distract him. But he was a scientist, and needed to approach this situation with reason. Here was a fellow who might have crucial information about the workings of this very strange world. Wilson needed to at least try to talk to him. He'd begin with the most obvious and recent question.

"Now, I know there are ways around this particular little problem around here," said Wilson, "but you are supposed to be dead. I saw you die. Not only did you die, but you fell apart into dust. Even the most powerful science can't reanimate dust."

Maxwell shrugged.

"Don't you shrug at me," said Wilson.

"You," said the old buzzard, pointing with the clean stick, "are supposed to be strapped into the Throne, screaming for your mummy."

"I don't think my mother would be very helpful in that situation. Also, you're changing the subject..."

"Who let you out, hmm?"

Wilson looked at him for a moment and looked away. He needed answers about this, too, but he hadn't planned to bring it up at the moment. The thought of it made him a bit uneasy yet. But this was no time to be squeamish!

"A strange woman," he said.

"Ah? Did she happen to be on fire or about to set one? Or was she old?"

He could still see her wide, haunted eyes, though the rest of the image was fuzzy. "No, she was... cloaked in darkness..." He had been so happy to see a human face, only to find out it was another shadow. He sighed through his nose.

Wait a second. "Is there a particular reason why she would be on fire or old?"

"Oh, not at all. Just the ramblings of an old man. What do you mean by 'cloaked in darkness'? Are you a poet now?"

Wilson swallowed. "I mean... darkness clung to her like a shroud..."

"You're a regular Keats." Maxwell snorted and looked away.

"That's what she was like, though." He could have kept going- the woman had had an overwhelmingly powerful aura. The woman had done something very painful and inexplicable to his heart until he passed out. The woman had seemed torn and bewildered...

But something about this felt wrong, and he had recently had massive cause to regret doing things that felt wrong. He held his tongue.

Maxwell looked sort of drawn. Pale.

"Is there something I should know?" Wilson asked.

"Not at all."

"Mm." Wilson frowned and looked away, drumming his fingers against the ground.

"What is that out there watching?"

"Pardon?"

Wilson pointed to a pair of glittering eyes out in the dark. "What's watching us?"

Maxwell raised his eyebrows. "You may as well ask me how gravity works."

"A distortion of space-time creates gravitational waves," Wilson said, slowly and clearly. "It's like electromagnetism. They're both really, really simple."

"Ah," said Maxwell. "Why don't you tell me what's watching us, then, Mr. Malapert?"

"That," he said, pointing at the watcher, "isn't science."

"Most of what you do," said Maxwell, "is not science."

It was beginning to look as if Maxwell were too unreasonable to give him many answers about things. "Alright," said Wilson. "Let's make an arrangement. You can go wherever you like in your wretched world, I certainly can't stop you anyway. You're welcome to the fire and if you catch anything to put in the cook pot you may feel free to use it. Sometimes I gather more than I need, and if you need my leftovers, you may have them. Don't go helping yourself to anything without my say-so. I don't want you to use my personal research equipment, and I don't want you wearing my clothes, and I don't want you to touch any of my bedding."

"My," said Maxwell. "How kind and generous of you. How shall I ever repay you?"

"Simple. I don't want to be hoodwinked, swindled, cheated, lied to, or taken advantage of," said Wilson, standing up and squaring his shoulders. "So you can repay me by resisting your instincts to do any of that. And if you trick me into building anything else I may kill you..."

Maxwell squinted at him. "You don't seem to think much of me, pal."

"Oh, really? You think so? Hm. Do we have a deal or not, Maxwell?"

"I suppose I can... accept this. I most certainly do not want to wear your tiny-man clothing. Shall we shake on it?" He held out a hand, a hand in an inky-black glove that made it look like a shadow- a hand with long, thin fingers- a hand that wavered slightly as if it were not entirely there. Looking at it gave Wilson a slight headache.

"Do we have to shake?" he asked.

"It's the polite thing," said Maxwell, but then he looked at Wilson's hand- slightly grimy from living outdoors and having no washbasin, nails ragged and slightly chewed, angry blister on the side of his thumb from chopping wood, scabby knuckles. "But I suppose there's no law saying we must."

///

The sun was nearly directly overhead, his stomach was growling and he'd found absolutely nothing interesting out here so far. Maybe there was nothing of use to find. Maxwell didn't seem to be out looking-

That way lay despair and madness. Of course there was a way out. There was always a way out. For the moment, all he needed was a bite to eat, and then he'd feel better- besides, Maxwell wasn't out looking for anything because Maxwell was incompetent to leave the camp, not because there was nothing to look for. See, there was Maxwell now, loitering in camp-

Maxwell was going through his things! "Hey!"

Maxwell's snooty nose was stuck in one of his science blueprints.

"I told you NOT to take things!" Wilson snapped, ripping it out of his hand.

"I didn't take it," said Maxwell, "I was merely looking at it."

"Well don't look at it!" Wilson clutched the paper in both hands. It was only a schematic for building a birdcage, something he already knew how to build, but it was his blueprint, darnit, not Maxwell's.

"You know, pal," Maxwell said, putting a hand on Wilson's shoulder, "it warms my heart to see you still believe in science after all that's happened."

He tensed at Maxwell's odd, slightly not-real touch, and Maxwell withdrew, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Of course I still believe in science," said Wilson. "Science wouldn't trick me."

"It has yet to reward you, though. And yet you carry on, undaunted. Wilson 'Perserverance' Higgsbury."

"The P stands for Percival."

"Ah? How unfortunate for you."

"It was my father's name." And he did not believe for a moment that Maxwell did not know that full well.

"Ah. Look, my point is," said Maxwell, "that I have something here that I believe you'd like to see." He held up a strange book. It had a plain black cover with a red M on the front. Utterly plain and unassuming.

And yet- this book. This book had power. Great and fearful power... more than all of the parts of the teleportation devices combined across all of the worlds he'd found them in!

"Oho, you feel it, don't you?" Maxwell looked entirely too pleased with himself- a warning sign. "A clever lad, you are."

"I know I am," said Wilson. "But cleverness has nothing to do with that book screaming my name." He took a step back, wagging a finger at Maxwell. "That thing's bad news. I'm pretty sure it's asking for blood."

"Bad news, yes, you're exactly right," said Maxwell. "No fooling you twice. Well, twice, maybe, but three times? Surely not." He cracked open the book. "Would you like to look inside?"

"Ah-ah," said Wilson. "I know better, thank you."

"Of course, of course," said Maxwell. "Well, I'm going to read for a bit. If you'd like to look over my shoulder I won't stop you."

He sat down and began to read.

Wilson began to inch closer... and it wasn't for the pleasure of Maxwell's disgusting mothballs-and-decay odor.

///

The project was over halfway to completion now, he'd guess. Just one more board here, and don't look too closely at what Maxwell's doing to those crows over there, and-let's see, this splinter of flint ought to work for a nail-

"Ahem."

He looked up. Maxwell was standing there with two skewers of food in hand.

"Ah, yes?" Wilson asked. "You need something?"

"Noticed you hadn't eaten." He shoved one of the skewers in Wilson's direction.

"Oh. I..." He took the food and blinked at it. "I guess I haven't."

Maxwell looked away. "I suppose we're even now."

No, they were not even. One did not kidnap a man, put him through hell, and then return a gift of food and call it even.

However, it had been a very long time since anyone had cooked anything at all for Wilson, the food smelled pleasant even if it looked to be undercooked on one side and burnt on the other, and he needed to eat. "Hmm," he said. "Thank you."

"Anything for my old pal." Maxwell sat beside him with a creaking of his elderly joints.



There were green mushrooms on this stick, and they were only half cooked. Eating the raw part alongside with the cooked was quite a head rush. As for the bits of purple meat that were still bleeding a little- Wilson would perhaps resist eating those.

He studied the half-constructed frame of the new doorway, and sighed.

"I know," said Maxwell. "You're depressed that you'll never be as accomplished a cook as I."

"Actually I was thinking that all this feels awfully familiar."

"Mm. And yet, you go on. As do I." Maxwell looked distant. "What are you waiting to get back to, Higgsbury?"

An attic that was wretchedly drafty in winter, a house with nothing living in it but caged vermin and bathroom fungus... distant neighbors he saw once in a blue moon who would squint at him and hurry onward.

"Don't give me the stink-eye, it's a completely reasonable question! Me, I'm thirsting for some champagne and a decent cigar."

"Ah," said Wilson. It would seem that the question had rather less depth of meaning than he'd initially assumed. "I could go for a cup of coffee."

"Mm, yes. As could I."

He wondered if Maxwell had any people back home. Probably not. A man like him probably wouldn't judge someone else for not wanting company, either. It was probably his only redeeming quality.

"And," Maxwell continued, "no doubt you're as eager to part ways as I am."

"Part ways? Oh. With you. Yeah." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, added the stick to the fire and headed back over to the boards he'd been hammering.

///

It was finished.

This wasn't an intricate machine like the others, just a rickety archway. Wilson had not been the one to add the swiveling, blinking eyeball that sat on top of the thing. He didn't know where that had come from. He didn't know what possible purpose that served...

"Ah, you've noticed," said Maxwell. "That's a personal touch."

"It sure is an eyeball!"

Maxwell nodded and looked pleased with himself.

"And why is there an eyeball...?" Wilson prompted.

"Hmm, if you have to ask, you'll never understand. Well, go ahead, pal."

"Go ahead?"

"I want you to do the honors," he said. "Throw the switch."

Wilson inched closer to the activating lever, paused, and looked back at Maxwell. "Is there a reason why you can't do this yourself?"

"I'm being generous," said Maxwell. "I got you here, you know, and I'm letting you get yourself out."

"How kind."

"I have my moments."

Wilson turned back to look at the lever. This was the way he'd gotten himself into this whole situation. It was stupid to do this again. It was insane to do this again. And yet if he didn't, he would be tortured with wondering what would have happened forever... he had to do it.

Besides, Maxwell was right there this time, and would presumably just throw the switch if he didn't do it, so... here went nothing.

He threw the switch.

Everything immediately went wrong.